



Pekin

Finding a Niche Through the Arts

By Cher Hersrud

They were obviously real motorcycle guys; Harley guys, with worn leather and tattoos. They both stood for a moment, just looking. Finally, the taller one said to the other, "I like this one, it's interesting." The second man nodded, moving closer. "I like the colors," he finally stated.

Were they looking at bike parts or new leathers? Deciding on a new tattoo? The bikers were looking at art. More specifically, they were looking at an abstract watercolor, created by a North Dakota artist. Even more specifically, they were in the City Auditorium in Pekin, North Dakota, (population 80), attending the Pekin Art Show.

According to the 2000 Census, North Dakota has 373 communities. Of those communities, only nine have a population of 10,000 or more and only 55 have a population more than 1,000. The remaining 309 communities struggle to survive. That struggle is becoming more difficult with the increasing regionalization of health-care, education, and retail business.



Photos by David Lipp



At left, Pekin Days t-shirts are sold on the street. Above, the Aneta Community Band performs. Below right, kids playing in the park.

There are, however many small communities across the state that are working hard to survive and maintain the rural lifestyle so valued by residents. Pekin is a shining example of the spirit, commitment, and community focus necessary to survive.

Pekin: Not Just Another Community Along the Two-Lane

The sign along Highway 15 is small and not commercially made, indicating Pekin: Next 3 Exits. Pekin is one of many small towns along the two-lane highways that you drive by, idly wondering how many people remain. Less than 100 people live in Pekin, yet it is a model community for the North Dakota Forestry Service and has received direct grants from the U.S. Forestry Service and National Endowment for the Arts. The community has a tree-planting project that is a national model and has initiated a memorial tree program in the local park. Pekin has new sidewalks through Community Development Block Grant Funds and an active community center that has hosted regional and statewide events.

Schools in the area have merged, healthcare is provided in the neighboring community of McVile, and local business has been limited to a locally owned elevator, a bar, a tire repair and sales business, and The Plant House, a greenhouse.

A banjo player in the street band.

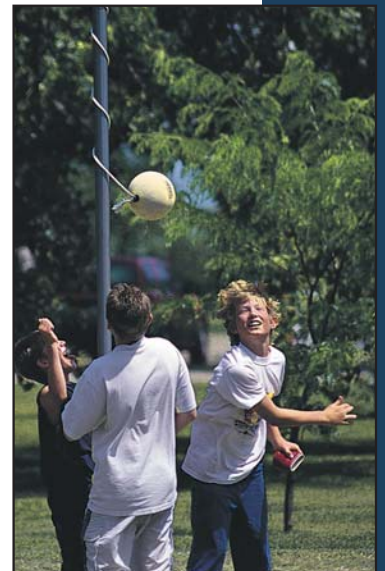


Like a majority of the rural communities in North Dakota, Pekin residents do not want to lose their community and their quality of life. As Arts Council Director Brenda Bjorlie says, "We know we will never become a big community, we simply want to maintain our quality of life and better our community." Bjorlie credits strong community pride and volunteerism for this success.

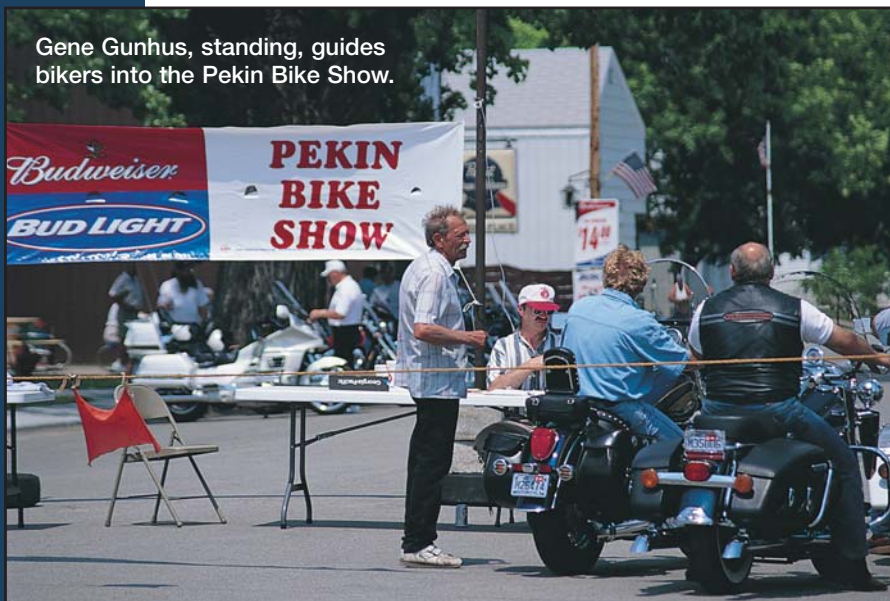
Community pride and community wide volunteerism is most evident during Pekin Days; the well maintained houses in the community are enhanced by a wonderful array of summer flowers.

A stroll through this small community during Pekin Days is at once relaxing and rejuvenating. It is an example of the pride and

spirit of rural North Dakota. Men play horseshoes; residents and bike show participants together. Women sit in the shade in the small park, enjoying the Swing Band. Children point out the display of the murals they created during the Summer Youth Camp. Seniors stroll by the motorcycles, on their way to play bingo in the Community Center. Many volunteers, like Arts Council



Gene Gunhus, standing, guides bikers into the Pekin Bike Show.

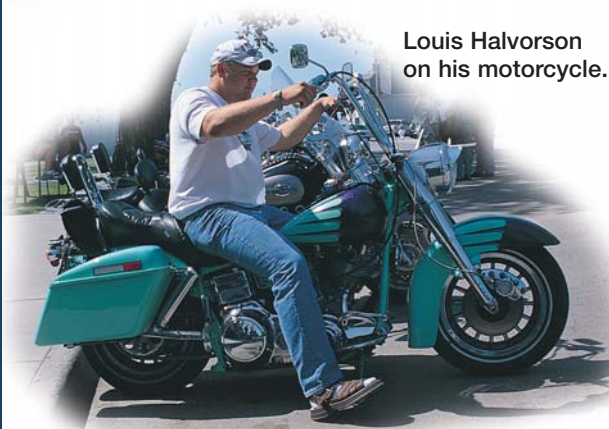


President Deb Hensrud, sell t-shirts for \$10 and handout programs and ballots for the Art Show. In the larger park, volunteers work to prepare for the dinner. Chairs are quickly moved from one location to another, and volunteers shift their duties accordingly.

Pekin and the Nelson County Arts Council have developed a niche and focused on it. It has become the regional arts center, a designation that was confirmed in 2001, when Pekin received the North Dakota Governor's Award for the Arts. They plan to build on this niche to enhance and support the community. While not bringing big business to the community, the plan is to develop small business and programming that will support and maintain the community.

Last Weekend in June

Initiated in 1993 to bolster Pekin Days, the Pekin Art Show is held the last weekend of June. The 2000 Pekin Art Show generated record sales of more than \$14,000. A vast majority of the sales were area residents acquir-



Louis Halvorson on his motorcycle.

ing the work of North Dakota artists. The Nelson County Arts Council is the organization responsible for the Art Show, which has expanded considerably since 1993. Council members work long days before and during the show.

In 2001, the featured artist for the Pekin Art Show was Greg Vettel, whose art is created utilizing motorcycle engine parts. The Nelson County Arts Council worked with the Park Board to schedule a bike show in conjunction with the Art Show to broaden attendance at the Art Show and broaden interest in the arts. The Bike Show was so successful in 2001, that it is now an annual event.

Taylor Barnes, director of the Jamestown Art Center is a 2003 co-juror, along with Sally Jeppson. Barnes is amazed at the strong support for the show. She asks, "How do they do it? I would love to host an art show in Jamestown as successful as this one."

This year's show was the 10th annual. It was also the year of the all-school reunion. In recognition of these two milestones, the community expanded programming to include Artists in the Park and a Wearable Art Show.



Young artist Scott Rorvig, McVile, shows the wall mural he helped paint to his grandmother, Norma Trost.

Developing a Niche: A Focused Effort

In 1993, a group of individuals began the Nelson County Arts Council, operating from Pekin. The council initiated the Pekin Art Show to provide access to arts, support for area artists, and expanded programming for Pekin Days.

After four years of offering the successful Pekin Art Show, the City of Pekin submitted a proposal and received an ArtsREACH grant from the National Endowment for

the Arts, to study the feasibility of renovating the old city auditorium building to offer year-around arts programming for the region.

Although the study did not recommend a major fundraising effort for the facility at that time, a survey of area residents to determine interest in additional arts programming was conducted. The survey response was extremely positive. Area residents requested additional days for the Art Show, summer arts programming for youth, and adult art classes.

The Arts Council responded immediately, expanding the art show an additional day, developing a summer arts camp for youth, and planning adult classes for the following winter. This was accomplished with support from the North Dakota Council on the Arts, strong leadership, and a tremendous all volunteer effort.

Summer Youth Arts Camp: Arts Experience and Economic Benefit

The Summer Youth Arts Camp was initiated at the request of area residents. The first year budget projected 40 youth, with 60 registering. Registration is currently limited, due to funding limitations, to 80 participants. Transportation quickly became a problem, with students attending from 13 different communities across the region. The Arts Council worked with the Dakota Prairie School District to provide bus transportation, and still there are parents who drive 80 miles twice daily to allow their children to attend.

The Camp is a weeklong day camp, offering both visual and performing arts. Classes run from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. daily. Instructors are area teachers and artists; all accredited and experienced. The Camp pays the instructors, providing additional income in an area of low salaries and job opportunities.

The Art Camp is held at Stump Lake Park, providing a natural environment for classes, with adequate facilities for youth. The Stump Lake Park management donates the use of the pavilion and shelters and the Stump Lake Cafe provides low cost lunches for the camp.

The Art Camp has not only provided economic benefit to the area. Students from the 2001 summer camp created a large sculpture from saplings and vines that was permanently placed next to one of the park's shelters. Grade seven through 12 students painted murals on the interior walls of the park bathrooms.

The culmination of the week long camp is a public per-



Karen Borland, of Li'l Darlings Dolls, Michigan, North Dakota, shows off one of her dolls to a prospective customer.

formance and exhibition. More than 200 people attended last year's event. A traveling exhibition of the murals created by children in grades two through six, toured area schools, the hospital, and other healthcare facilities.

Registration fees, fundraising activities, and grants support the Summer Arts Youth Camp. The council is committed to maintaining fees that are affordable, however it has also raised scholarship funds to support attendance regardless of income. Registration fees do not fully support the expense, so the Arts Council has sought and received support from the North Dakota Council on the Arts, and raises funds through a raffle held during the art show.

The collaboration of the Nelson County Arts Council, Stump Lake management, the Nelson County Park District, and the area school superintendents is significant. As is the case in a majority of rural communities, volunteerism is a way of life. Parents and council board members assist during the camp and work hard to raise the necessary funds to continue and expand the camp.



Preparing the meat for one of the community meals.



Featured artist/photographer Arika Johnson discusses her work with Cecil Loe.

Adult Classes by Popular Demand

A third request within the regional survey results was for adult arts classes. The Nelson County Arts Council began with a series that included rosemaling and calligraphy. A watercolor class was offered in 2001, taught by a Fargo artist/instructor.

Adults, excited by the Summer Youth Camp, have requested a Summer Arts Program for adults. This year, on August 1-2, the council will sponsor a two-day workshop, featuring instruction in tie dying and basketry. Artists, Elizabeth Stromme and Nelda Schrupp, will teach the classes.

Where is Pekin?

From Fargo it is a 69-mile trip North on I-29 to Thompson (Exit 130), then another 60 miles West on Highway 15.

Pekin is 44 miles Southeast of Devils Lake, turning off Highway 2 at Lakota and traveling down Highway 1 for 17 miles.

From I-94, the drive North on Highway 1 (near Valley City) at the end of June is a beautiful drive of rolling hills and blooming fields of yellow canola and blue flax.

No matter which way you travel, look for the sign that states, Pekin Next 3 Exits.

For more information about Pekin call City Auditor, Jane Hanson at 701- 296-4404. For information about the Nelson County Arts Council contact Brenda Bjorlie at 701-296-4515. For information about the Prairie View Lodge, call 701- 296-4411.

The Arts as Community Development

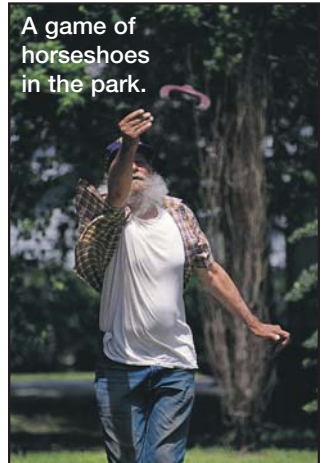
The City of Pekin received a Rural Community Assistance grant from the U.S. Forestry Service to undergo a community planning process. A planning committee, comprised of both town and rural residents worked to develop a Community Action Plan that was published in December 2002.

One of the projects within the plan is the renovation of the City Auditorium, home of the annual Art Show. The roof of the facility is in poor shape, and a heating system and new windows are needed to utilize the facility year around. The project is a major fundraising effort for this small community, but has been very successful. As of this publication, more than \$10,000 in local contributions have been made to the fund. Contributions have been matched through grants from the North Dakota Community Foundation and the U.S. Forestry's Rural Community Assistance program.

Additional projects within the Community Action Plan are also underway. A group of investors from nearby Tolna acquired property in Pekin and opened a motel, Prairie View Lodge. A convenience store is also connected to the lodge. The new accommodations will substantially support the continued arts programming within the area, and will also enhance the community's ability to house hunters, bicyclists, and other visitors to the area.

As rural communities across the Midwest address a loss of population, followed by the merging of education and healthcare, followed by the loss of local business, there are lessons to be learned from the City of Pekin. The community is known across the state as an arts center, it is known as a community whose residents have taken charge of the town's destiny. It is a community that will survive. ♦

Cher Hersrud grew up in Bowman. For the past five years, she has managed The Resource Center, a statewide technical assistance program for North Dakota nonprofit organizations and rural communities. The Center is a division of the North Dakota Community Foundation.



A game of horseshoes in the park.

